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SUBJECT: SOMALI REGION UPDATE: HUMANITARIAN
COORDINATION AND ACCESS ISSUES

Summary

¶1. USAID officials attended the Regional Humanitarian Coordination meeting on May 25 in Jijiga town (Jijiga Zone, Somali Region). Points of discussion were the poor performance of the main April to June rains, the soon-to-be released nutrition survey for five districts of the Somali Region, recommendations for improved non-governmental organization (NGO) performance based on the findings of a Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) quick assessment, and the start in late June of a multi-agency assessment to determine the food needs of the region for the next six months.

¶2. On May 24, the Acting President of the Somali National Regional State (SNRS) released draft guidelines for NGOs to obtain a blanket six-month clearance in their areas of operation. While USAID officials welcomed the procedures, questions arose as to the capacity of the relevant SNRS offices to implement their responsibilities in the process within the stated two-week timeline. End summary.

Background

¶3. In an effort to alleviate long-standing humanitarian assistance bottlenecks in the Somali Region, the U.S. Ambassador, former USAID Director, UN Humanitarian Coordinator, and USAID Senior Policy Advisor met with the newly appointed SNRS President and his senior staff on March 5, 2009 to encourage

better access for all humanitarian actors based on transparent procedures and improved coordination and dialogue with NGOs. This resulted in the formation of a monthly "Humanitarian Forum" by the Regional President which met in Jijiga on April 3 and May 25. A smaller sub-group was formed with USAID, NGO and UN representative to negotiate formal, clear and transparent procedures for humanitarian access which culminated in the presentation on May 24 of the draft procedures now under discussion.

Jijiga Humanitarian Coordination Meeting

¶4. USAID officials, including the Acting Mission Director, the Senior Policy Advisor and the USAID/Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) Senior Program Officer attended the monthly Humanitarian Coordination meeting in Jijiga (Jijiga Zone, Somali Region) on May 25. The meeting, coordinated by UN OCHA, was chaired by the Acting Regional President of the SNRS. Participants also included the UN Humanitarian Coordinator, representatives from international and local NGOs, UN agencies, and SNRS officers including the new SNRS Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the head of the DPPB. USAID officials noted that participation in this forum has increased dramatically not only in the number of participants but also the level of GoE representation, and has become a much improved forum for active and constructive dialogue between the humanitarian community and SNRS officials.

--- Rainfall Pattern and Seasonal Assessment ---

¶5. The SNRS HC reported that the primary seasonal rains from April to June have thus far been sporadic and insufficient. While the rains started on time they ceased early in most parts of the Somali Region. The SNRS HC noted that even if the rains fell within the next two weeks, they would be too late for planting in the agro-pastoral areas, although beneficial for pasture generation. The SNRS HC stated that a seasonal multi-agency assessment will take place in late June to determine the food needs for the next six months. The SNRS HC emphasized the critical role played by the World Food Program (WFP) especially considering the challenges faced by the world food price crisis.

-- Nutrition Survey --

¶6. A multi-agency nutrition survey covering five districts in the Somali Region was recently concluded and the results will be released shortly pending review from the Federal Ministry of Health, according to the Acting Regional President who stated that the next step would require the humanitarian community to "be prepared and work together" to respond to assessed needs.

¶7. USAID/Ethiopia has received unofficial reports from survey participants stating that global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates in some districts are at the emergency threshold level of 15 percent and higher than 20 percent in some cases. These percentages are especially worrisome since the assessment was conducted at a time when malnutrition rates should be at their lowest and considering that most of the Somali Region now enters the long dry season when malnutrition rates traditionally spike upwards.

-- DPPB Assessment of NGO Performance --

¶8. The head of the DPPB reported results from a rapid assessment of NGO performance in parts of the

Somali Region pointing out areas where improvement is needed. While acknowledging that some NGOs provide a great service to the region, he noted that many did not coordinate fully with the appropriate line bureaus; engaged in too much "soft" (training) instead of "hard" (boreholes, for example) interventions; and that some activities were not adequately coordinated with his office resulting in interventions that did not reflect the priorities of the SNRS. In addition, the DPPB head reported that NGOs were not sufficiently engaged in critical interventions such as de-stocking and fodder provision, and that some NGOs request project extensions from the donors without consulting the SNRS.

¶9. Participants, including the UNICEF Representative, noted that such assessments would carry more "weight" and be more effective if they were sector-based and encompassed a multi-agency approach utilizing staff from the various UN clusters and NGOs.

-- The Need for Capacity Building --

¶10. The Acting Regional President and the SNRS HC repeatedly stressed the need for capacity building support to the DPPB and office of the SNRS HC in order to monitor and evaluate NGO performance more effectively. This includes both human resource and logistical support. USAID/Ethiopia is investigating various options and believes that increased monitoring and evaluation will help alleviate suspicions of NGO activities and therefore lead to greater access and flexibility of operations. USAID is providing support for strategic planning at the regional level through its partner the International City Managers' Association (ICMA)

-- Health --

¶11. The Acting Regional President stated that while the number of measles cases reported was "not alarming" potential measles outbreak remains a concern noting that children are especially vulnerable in time of food insecurity.

----- Guidelines for Blanket Operational Clearance -----

¶12. On May 24, the Acting Regional President presented draft procedures for NGOs to follow to obtain blanket six-month travel clearances in their areas of operation within the five conflict zones of the Somali Region. Participants included key NGOs, heads of UN agencies and donors, including USAID officials. The draft procedures require NGOs to submit their proposed activities and staff details to the SNRS HC, DPPB and appropriate line bureaus for decisions on the appropriateness of the interventions and whether they accurately reflect the priorities of the SNRS. The Acting Regional President stated that the procedures have been fully vetted and approved by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the Regional Head of Security.

¶13. While USAID/Ethiopia welcomes this positive step towards increased transparency and clarity in the clearance process, several concerns remain including whether the process culminating in blanket clearance approval can be completed within the stated two-week timeline and whether the final clearance letter signed by the Office of the Regional President will "carry weight" with the military and local officials at the zonal and woreda level. A second draft is currently under review by

a small NGO and UN task force.

Conclusion

¶14. The initial intervention of the U.S. Ambassador and former USAID Director has been critical in the establishment of the monthly humanitarian meeting leading to more fruitful dialogue and coordination between SNRS officials and the humanitarian community. USAID/Ethiopia, including USAID/OFDA, will continue to attend these meetings and monitor the humanitarian situation with special emphasis on the food security situation and required interventions.

¶15. USAID/Ethiopia, including USAID/OFDA, supports the request for capacity building of the DPPB and the office of the SNRS HC to improve monitoring and evaluation in order to lessen SNRS suspicion of NGOs and thereby increase flexibility and timeliness of NGO interventions.

¶16. USAID/Ethiopia welcomes the issuance of the draft access clearance guidelines but will monitor the stated two-week timeline for approval of the blanket clearance requests noting that humanitarian assistance will be increasingly needed as malnutrition rates rise throughout the dry season.

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